



# Better Sight

for

Story and Photos by  
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# Soldiers

LASER eye surgery has become increasingly popular in the United States and abroad, as more people share their positive stories about being able to see without cumbersome glasses or contact lenses.

In Germany, soldiers can have the procedure done free of charge through the Warfighter Refractive Eye-Surgery Program offered at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, "the only U.S. military facility in Europe where refractive surgery is performed," said Air Force Dr. (Lt. Col.) Todd Hess, one of four ophthalmologists who perform the procedure at LRMC.

Through the program, soldiers and airmen may undergo Lasik corrective eye surgery, which was first offered at LRMC in January 2003, Hess said.

Until Lasik became available at LRMC, ophthalmologists performed photorefractive keratectomy to flatten the cornea by scraping off surface cells. The first PRK was performed at LRMC in April 2002, Hess said.

"We've done more than 400 eyes since October 2002," Hess said. (Doctors don't count

patients or pairs of eyes because some patients have only one eye done.)

The advantage of Lasik over PRK is that patients recover more quickly from Lasik, in two to three days versus seven to 10 days, Hess said, because there's no scraping involved. Even after undergoing a PRK, "almost 75 percent of patients have 20/20 vision after one month, without having to wear glasses," Hess said.

Word that the military offers this surgery has gotten around, he added, and the waiting list for the procedure has grown as a result. Considering that in 2001 the average cost for the PRK was \$1,600 per eye in the United States, it's easy to understand why soldiers would want to take advantage of the program.

A prospective candidate for the surgery must first obtain authorization for the treatment by obtaining a form from his optometry clinic and having his commander sign it, Hess said. "The commander also selects a category of treatment, based on the soldier's job.

Category one refers to soldiers who are frequently deployed; two covers those less frequently deployed in response to real-world contingencies, but deployed often to participate in training exercises; and three is everyone else, Hess said.

Once the treatment is authorized, the soldier is given an eye exam, during which time the optometrist can ensure he meets the criteria for Lasik surgery. Typically, that means that the prospective patient is extremely near- or far-sighted, Hess said.

"If you have trouble focusing and wear bifocals, it's probably not for you," he added. "A lot of patients with bifocals do have the surgery done, but they have to realize they'll still need reading glasses, and it might increase their dependence on reading glasses.

"The procedure takes about 10 minutes," Hess said. "But we do an extensive pre-op exam that disqualifies about 20 percent of the referred candidates."

Some reasons include too little tear production, a condition called kerato-



The Lasik procedure itself takes only about 10 minutes, but an extensive preoperative examination disqualifies about 20 percent of the referred candidates.

conus, and very dilated pupils. Patients with the latter, Hess said, are not treated because patients with large pupils who have undergone the surgery complain about problems with glare afterward.

1LT Marcy Webster, a staff nurse at LRMC, had the surgery in July 2002. She'd thought about having it

read the clock on the wall. "I'd recommend it," she said, "but not to people who only have to wear glasses occasionally."

Now, she feels like she has a new lease on life, Webster said. "When I deploy, I don't need an insert in my gas mask to be able to see. And I don't need to pack contact lens cases,

## ■ Toss the glasses and contact lenses

Are you eligible?

done for years, she said. "I'd been wearing glasses since I was 8-years old and contacts since 20. My vision got so bad I couldn't see my alarm clock in the morning. My poor vision impaired my life."

Webster said as soon as she got off the table after the surgery she could

cleaner and solution."

In five to 10 years, all the U.S. military services will have greatly reduced their members' dependence on glasses and contact lenses as more military medical facilities offer corrective eye surgery to their patients, Hess said. 